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ABSTRACT

Professional staff in school libraries and instructional media centers (IMCs) located in 229 Wisconsin middle and junior high schools were surveyed anonymously to collect information on censorship attempts in their schools during 1978-79 and 1979-80. A total of 212 surveys were returned. Survey participants were asked to respond to questions regarding their school library or IMC selection policies, the occurrence of censorship attempts, the types of material questioned, the sources of objections to school library or IMC material, the reasons given for censorship attempts, and the outcome of the attempts. Background details were also collected, including grades and types of school districts served, school enrollments, and staff employed in the school library or IMC. This report briefly presents the survey results, in terms of percentages. Parents are reported as the major source of censorship attempts. It is noted that each Wisconsin school district should have an official school board-approved policy for both the selection and reconsideration, if necessary, of school library IMC material, and that statistics gathered on censorship attempts in Wisconsin elementary and high schools will be reported in later publications. (ESR)

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CENSORSHIP OF IMC MATERIALS

IN WISCONSIN SCHOOLS

PART I:

FOCUS ON MIDDLE/JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Results of a survey conducted in May, 1980

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction
Madison, Wisconsin

IR050117

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A Report of a Survey of Censorship Attempts of IMC Materials in Wisconsin's Public Middle/Junior High Schools

Survey Conducted: May, 1980

INTRODUCTION

Newspapers, journals, books, and other information sources report from time to time information and events which relate to what some have called a national trend toward an increasing number of censorship attempts in the public schools. L. B. Woods indicated, for example, that over 910 censorship cases were reported between 1966-1975 to the Office for Intellectual Freedom, American Library Association. Of these, public schools accounted for 62% of all education institutions.[1]

The current status of censorship attempts in Wisconsin of library or instructional media center (IMC) materials in middle/junior high schools was not known prior to this survey. Such information is useful in view of the continuing visibility of censorship attempts nationally, and the resulting interest in whether or not such attempts are being made within this state.

In May, 1980, the Bureau of Instructional Media Programs, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, conducted an anonymous survey of professional media specialists in middle/junior high school libraries or IMCs of attempts to censor library or IMC materials. The period covered in the survey was 1978-79 and 1979-80. The information was gathered to:

a. determine the extent of recent censorship attempts in school libraries or IMCs

b. develop plans for the Bureau of Instructional Media Programs designed to assist schools and school librarians/media specialists in the evaluation, selection, and reconsideration of media center materials

This survey report is part I of a three part survey. Parts II and III will report statistics gathered from elementary and high schools, respectively. Current status surveys will be conducted in a representative sample of elementary school IMCs in 1981, and in all high schools in Wisconsin shortly thereafter.

Although 308 public schools in Wisconsin are designated as junior or middle schools, only 229 surveys were distributed. This is because many schools share library or IMC facilities in the same building with an elementary or senior high school. DPI records were able to identify 229 schools with separate library/IMC programs at the middle/junior high school level. This also means that K-8, K-12, or 7-12 schools were not included.

Of the 229 surveys sent, 212 or 93% were completed and returned. Two hundred four (204) or 89% were found to be sufficiently complete for inclusion.

For purposes of the survey, the term "censorship attempts" refers to attempts of parents or other citizens to abridge the rights of other parents, teachers, or children in having access to information which is part of the educational program.

[1] L. B. Woods, "Is Academic Freedom Dead in Public Schools?", Phi Delta Kappan, October, 1979, pp. 104-106.

Survey Results of Censorship Attempts in Wisconsin's Middle/Junior High School Libraries/IMCs

Conducted May, 1980*

1) Grades included in survey:

5-8
6-8
7-8
7-9
8-9

2) Highest enrollment percentages:

31.4% - 300-499 students
34.8% - 500-749 students
23.5% - 750 or more students

3) District Enrollment Size:
(covered the entire range)

4) District types identified:

40% - urban
24% - suburban
30.9% - rural
4.4% - no choice

5) Number of full-time professionals:

79.9% reported 1
9.8% reported 2
10.3% reported 0 or didn't answer

6) Number of part-time professionals:

26% reported 1
1% reported 2
73% reported 0

7) Support staff:

56.9% reported 1
20.1% reported 2
4.9% reported 3
18.1% reported 0

8) Highest percentages of years employed as librarian/media specialist:

71% - 6 or more years
25% - 1-5 years

9) Highest percentages of years employed as a librarian/media specialist at school receiving survey:

58% - 6 or more years
26% - 1-5 years

The number of years a librarian/media specialist had been either in the field or at that school had no significant relationship to the number of censorship attempts reported.

10) In the selection of IMC book/printed materials, what percentage of materials were teachers actively involved in selecting?

0 - 25% = 58%
26 - 50% = 25%
51 - 75% = 12%
76 - 100% = 4%
No answer = 2%

11) In the selection of audiovisual materials, what percentage of materials were teachers actively involved in selecting?

0 - 25% = 10%
26 - 50% = 7%
51 - 75% = 18%
76 - 100% = 64%

12) Primary Sources for selection of IMC materials - major responses only. (Respondents were asked to check their first three choices)

1st choice 68% = professional selection tools
9% = teacher recommendations
8% = commercial catalogs
3% = first hand examination

2nd choice 39% = teacher recommendations
20% = first hand examination
18% = commercial catalogs
9% = professional selection tools

* Where totals can normally be expected to equal 100%, they may not always do so because of rounding.

12) continued

3rd choice 29% = teacher recommendations
28% = first hand examination
24% = commercial catalogs
17% = student recommendations
13% = professional selection tools
9% = jobbers

Major sources summarized:
professional selection tools, teacher recommendations, first-hand examination, commercial catalogs

13) Is there a materials selection policy approved by the school board?

Yes = 84%
No = 14%
No answer = 2%

14) Does the policy contain provision and procedures for the review of challenged materials?

Yes = 81%
No = 6%
No answer = 13%

The percentage of total schools reporting having or not having selection policies and reconsideration policies compared to those having censorship attempts was about the same.

15) When was the materials selection policy approved?

Within last two years = 23%
3 - 5 years ago = 40%
6 - 10 years ago = 10%
11 or more years = 3%
don't know = 25%

16) Is there a provision for periodic review of the policy?

Yes = 35%
No = 48%
No answer = 17%

17) Have there been any censorship attempts of IMC materials occurring in your school?

1978-79	1979-80
Yes = 16% (33 schools)	Yes = 14% (28 schools)
No = 80%	No = 81%
No answer = 4%	No answer = 5%

18) Of those answering "no" censorship attempts, 21% felt that they were under pressure to restrict or curb selections beyond constraints dictated by budget or curriculum. It was felt that the source of the pressure primarily came from parents, administrators, and teachers, respectively.

19) Based on 61 respondents who indicated censorship attempts, 50% reported 1 attempt, 26% reported 2 attempts, 16% reported 3 attempts, 7% reported 4 attempts and 2% reported 5 attempts.

a. According to district type, schools which indicated that they were rural had more censorship attempts in 1978-79. Of 33 censorship attempts reported in 1978-79,

10 were urban (30% compared to 40% in the entire survey indicating that they were urban)

5 were suburban (15% compared to 24% for the entire survey)

17 were rural (52% compared to 30.9% for entire survey)

1 - no response

b. According to district type, schools which indicated that they were urban or rural had more censorship attempts in 1979-80. Of 28 censorship attempts reported in 1979-80,

11 were urban (39% compared to 24% for entire survey)

5 were suburban (18% compared to 24% for entire survey)

10 were rural (36% compared to 30.9% for entire survey

2 - no response

20) Type of material questioned:

Books - 95% of those reporting censorship attempts
Magazines - 21% of those reporting censorship attempts
Newspapers - 2% of those reporting censorship attempts
Other AV materials - 3% of those reporting censorship attempts

21) Factors precipitating censorship attempts varied.

22) Primary reasons given for censorship attempts (in order of frequency):

sexuality
profanity
morality; immaturity of users
obscenity
nudity
human reproduction
drugs; witchcraft
violence

23) It was reported that objections came overwhelmingly from parents; others came from administrators and teachers.

24) 30% of those experiencing censorship problems indicated that written procedures were not followed at all; 30% indicated that they were followed in full.

Comment: The question of whether a recommendation policy was followed fully or not appeared to be somewhat related to who questioned the material. The survey's results show an obvious need for consistency in the utilization of the reconsideration policy regardless of whether the person requesting reconsideration is a parent, school board member, teacher, or administrator.

25) 75% of those experiencing censorship attempts did not seek assistance outside the district. The Cooperative Children's Book Center was the source named in all but one case in which the American Library Association (ALA) was listed.

26) Of those 61 schools experiencing censorship attempts:

a) 31% indicated that materials were being altered to remove or conceal objectionable parts

b) 48% indicated that there was restricted shelving of certain materials

c) 15% indicated deletions of certain materials from purchase orders by persons in an administrative capacity regardless of recommendations or who requested materials.

The practices cited were initiated by the librarian/media specialist in 64% of the cases, and by the principal in 20% of the cases. Other initiators varied.

A Close Look at One Censorship Attempt in Those Schools Reporting Censorship

27) 85.5% indicated that the censorship attempt did not receive publicity in the community.

28) In terms of final disposition of the material

38% remained on open shelves as before
28% were removed
15% were placed in another school
12% placed on restricted shelving
8% were edited

In 23 cases where material was retained, 10 respondents indicated that the reconsideration policy was followed "not at all" or "minimally", while 12 respondents indicated that policy was followed "fully" or "quite a bit".

In the 17 cases where materials were removed completely, 11 librarian/media specialists reported procedures followed either "not at all" or "minimally".

In the 7 cases where material was placed on restricted shelving, survey respondents indicated that 4 reported that the reconsideration policy was not followed at all, while 2 reported that it was followed fully. One respondent checked not applicable.

29) 36% of the librarians/media specialists felt the request for reconsideration was justified

64% felt the request was unjustified

30) 83% said the incident did not result in a change in their personal selection criteria or procedures

17% said that it did change criteria or procedures

31) 91% said the incident did not bring about a change in the school or district's selection policy or procedures

9% said that the incident did bring about a change in the school or district's selection policy or procedures

32) When asked, "Do you feel censorship attempts will increase in the 1980s in your district?" (Answered only by those experiencing censorship attempts.)

20% reported "yes"
18% reported "no"
23% reported "don't know"
39% reported "will remain the same"

CONCLUSION

The Department of Public Instruction urges every Wisconsin school district to have an official school board-approved policy for the selection and reconsideration of materials provided in the school's library or IMC. The survey indicates that most school districts have a materials selection policy. However, survey results also show that when censorship attempts have occurred, the approved reconsideration policy has not been followed consistently. The Department of Public Instruction urges the following:

that every district have a materials selection policy;

that every selection policy have a procedure for dealing fairly with requests for reconsideration of materials;

that the selection policy be current, having been reviewed at least every three years;

that the policy contain a provision for periodic review;

that the selection policy be the actual basis for selection of materials;

that teachers be actively involved in the selection of both print and audio-visual materials in the IMC;

that the reconsideration policy be followed consistently for all persons.

"Suggestions for Dealing With Censorship of Media Center Materials in Schools: A Wisconsin Plan" best explains these and other recommendations. The 1981 revised edition is available for $.50 postage and handling from:

Department of Public Instruction Publication Office
GEF 3, Plaza Level
125 S. Webster Street
Madison, WI 53702

Questions about this survey report should be directed to Dianne McAfee Williams, Director, Bureau of Instructional Media Programs, Division for Library Services, Department of Public Instruction.